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ABSTRACT

Presented in 1970 at the National Training Institute for Vocational and Related Personnel, this paper discusses the current and severe problems of rural America. It is noted that, although declining, the American rural population is one of the world's largest rural populations. The document states that the obvious characteristics of rural America are its poverty and low level of public services. A comparison is made between rural America's attempt to provide vocational and technical education through adherence to a system of comprehensive schools and the attempt by cities to satisfy vocational education needs by way of specialization. The organizational and administrative problems of vocational education in rural areas are discussed, and conclusions are made that suggest the need for state and locally supported Federal action to achieve equality of educational opportunity. (AN)

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ORGANIZATION AND ADMINISTRATION OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION FOR RURAL AREAS

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by

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The Images of Rurality

As one addresses oneself to the topic of this paper, he is struck by the variety of images which have been used to interpret and to reconstruct rural life. The mention of rural life sometimes recalls the existence of natural virtue, a simple image of the peace and quiet of the country as against the rush, the noise and the filth of the city. Rural life has also been seen as the life of the past: of the writer's childhood or of his education, as in the following lines by Whittier:

> Still sits the schoolhouse by the road,
> A ragged beggar sleeping;
> Around it still the sumachs grow,
> And blackberry-vines are creeping.

Literature is filled with perspectives on a rural existence that has vanished or is vanishing. Here the image becomes confused with history so that many writers come to set dates, periods and historical formulations to the convenient habit of rural retrospect.

What is clear at once, or should be clear, is that this is not a simple difference in objective facts; it is a contrived system of viewing a contrast between the tradition of the rural past and a modern interpretation of reality. It has become almost a literary convention to assume that there once existed valid reasons for Rural America, but that these reasons have long since lost their validity.

Also clear are the misconceptions of more important reality. It was, for example, a productive and modernizing rural scene which became the base for the Industrial Revolution. Capitalism, which is now so often identified with industrial production, was first a rural phenomenon. The major achievement of industrialization, the growth in output per man, has always been greater in agriculture than in any other sector. Moreover, the category of individuals referred to in other countries as peasantry has never existed in America.

As we look back over a 200 year history, what we're seeing is not the destruction of a romantic and timeless rural order, but the bitter disturbance of making a new order. Against this reality, it is easier to understand the wishful images of literary convention, including the effort to find more justification for the past than for the present.

The Myths of Urbanism

If one switches the scene from Rural to Urban, one finds some equally contrived conventions which I have called the "Myth of Urbanism".[1] Here one finds some equally distorting conventions. One is the fashionable tendency to focus attention on "urban crises", or the "problem of the cities", or the "crisis of urbanization", to accept without question that we as a nation are running out of space and that we are all becoming a part of a homogeneous urban sprawl. The myth is enhanced by the Census Bureau's definition of urban: any organized settlement of more than 2500 people or any organized settlement in excess of about 650 families. The popular conception of urban can hardly be justified in any settlement of 650 families, or even in a settlement of 6500 families.

How about the large cities, those with populations which exceed one million? Actually there are only five of them, and their combined population includes only 9.8% of America's population. If one took the combined populations of all of America's cities with more than 500,000 people, the total would be only about 16% of our total population. This proportion of America's population, that is the proportion living in cities of over one-half million, has hardly increased at all in the last forty years. The most rapidly growing segment is the population living in cities of 10,000 to 50,000, a segment that has increased by 50% since 1920.

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1 The Myth of Urbanism, Rural Education News, Volume 22, No. 1, March, 1970.

Are the facts hidden elsewhere? Could more descriptive information be found by examining population densities? Is it possible that urban places have become collections of urban jurisdictions jammed together in growing clusters? Again, the facts contradict our impressions. The accepted minimum measurement of urban environment is a population density of 1,000 persons per square mile. The measure of suburban environment is 500 per square mile. America has very few places with population densities of 1,000 per square mile. Moreover, it is difficult to find jurisdictions with population concentrations of 500 per square mile. One-third of our states - 17 to be exact - do not have a single county with a population density of 500 per square mile.

As one looks at population, on a state basis, he is again impressed with the lack of population density. Twenty-three states have population densities of less than fifty persons per square mile and thirty-seven states have densities of less than 100 per square mile. As one scrutinizes the urban population of the United States, he is obviously concerned with the relatively small number residing in the eroding "inner city", but he is also impressed with a far greater number of urban dwellers who live on plots of land that are larger than the average farm in India, Japan, or Pakistan.

What is the size of rural America? What conceptions are held about its comparative importance? The facts are incredible and, for the most part, unrecognized. To say that thirty per cent of America's population is rural, and that it has declined from a much higher figure, is to miss the significance of status while merely highlighting the importance of trends. Here, again, writers (including educators, rural sociologists, and politicians) have become so preoccupied with describing Rural America in terms of rural retrospect that they have failed to take account of the problems of the present.

The size of the rural population (according to the 1960 Census) is equal to the combined population of every city in the United States whose population exceeds 80,000 persons. Its size is equivalent to the total population of America's 160 largest cities. If America's urban population did not exist, the remaining rural population would be large enough to be classified as the world's eighth largest country. Only China, India, Russia, Japan, Indonesia, Pakistan and Brazil have total populations which exceed the total population of the United States. No country in Europe and only one in Latin America (Brazil) have total populations which exceed the rural population of the United Sates. The hypothetical case should be extended further: if America's urban population did not exist, its remaining ~~urban~~ rural population could be classified as an underdeveloped country. More than half of rural families have incomes below $3,000, about 2/3 have substandard housing, and in educational attainment rural adults lag by almost three years.

This is a grim picture, and it does not seem to be getting brighter. While the so-called urban crisis has developed organized and literate spokesmanship, the rural complexities have been regarded as problems that would go away by themselves, or would be self-limiting by trends in population growth and migration. Rural America has not acquired spokesmanship or representation that is adequate to the solution of problems found in rural areas.

The Obvious and the Less Obvious Aspects of Rural Education

The most obvious feature found in rural areas is the existence of poverty. It is not likely to be accompanied by complaining or any other organized spokesmanship, but the general level of wealth is nevertheless likely to be very low. One finds very few substantial houses and the income-producing buildings are likely to be of the type of construction

more geared to economy than to durability or efficiency. Most of the population is so near the subsistence level that there is little enthusiastic response to the opportunity to join organizations for providing voluntary services or even to join in programs of adult education.

Another obvious feature is the low level and low standard of public services as compared to that provided in urban areas. Medical services are of limited range and in short supply. Libraries are non-existent or limited, and stores are stocked with the simplest requirements. Schools are guided by prudence and economy; prudence requiring that the curriculum be mainly preparatory, and economy requiring that it be little else.

There are less obvious features of rural areas which need highlighting because they impinge on the success of organizing and implementing any kind of educational program. First, the school is viewed as an institution to facilitate social mobility by lateral, rather than vertical, movements. Success in school implies that one can and should move out of the community, as well as out of the school. The rural school ordinarily measures its success by its individual students who succeed elsewhere, preferably outside of the community, rather than by the way in which the school and its graduates contribute to the economic and social goals of the community in which it is located. Group goals are thus subsidiary to individual achievement.

A similar situation prevails among the teachers in rural schools. Many of them suffer from a sense of grievance resulting from the lower levels of salary and status often associated with rural teaching. Their aspirations are not to move vertically to higher levels of satisfaction and reward in the rural community, but laterally to a larger school, preferably one in a metropolitan center.

Second, there remains a social ceiling to individual ambition in rural areas. There is a limit to the activity, the innovation and the wealth that is considered proper to display, and there are penalties for exceeding the limits. In rural areas, one cannot opt out of groups as he can in urban environments.

Third, there is a rapid decline of the entrepreneur in rural areas. The decline in the number of farmers is well known. The decline in non-farm entrepreneurs is less obvious. The number of jobs in rural areas have declined at the rate of 50,000 per year for the last decade. Most of the reduction in jobs has occured by business failure among small businesses. The risks have included the inability to find trained workers and the inability to compete with businesses that have system-wide management services. Most of the successful businesses in rural communities are those which rely on management services which originate from sources external to the rural community.

The Organization of Vocational Education in Rural Areas

The organization of vocational education in rural areas has ordinarily attempted to follow the typical model of the comprehensive high school, an institution intended to be more congenial to democratic traditions and values than the specialized high schools found in many other countries. In his writings on the American High School, Dr. James Conant said, "I admire the comprehensive high school in the towns with one high school and see it as an instrument of democracy." He also added that, "the metropolitan areas of the country are almost without high schools that, in regard to the curriculum, are widely comprehensive in nature." Conant regarded the comprehensive high school as the "one truly distinctive feature of American secondary education." Textbook writers still quote Conant to support their

preference for the comprehensive school and to urge its expansion as a system for achieving a differentiated curriculum, particularly one that includes vocational education.

If Conant were to rewrite his material, it would be necessary for him to conclude that the comprehensive school is no longer a distinctive feature of American secondary education. At the time that he wrote it, he had already concluded that high schools in metropolitan areas were not comprehensive in nature. Now he could conclude that high schools outside of metropolitan areas are not comprehensive either, and that comprehensive schools in rural areas have always been rare and unique. As a planning concept for vocational education, the comprehensive community high school is a defunct model in both the metropolitan and the rural areas of the country. In metropolitan areas the specialized high school has taken its place. In rural areas where there was little to replace, the schools are becoming less rather than more comprehensive.

Is it an overstatement to say that comprehensive high schools are becoming relics of a preferred but unrealistic past? Again, let's look at the facts.

In the urban areas of the North and East, the special purpose high school is more the rule than the exception. All of the New York City public senior high schools are officially classified as either academic or vocational. Of the 60 academic high schools, four use qualifying examinations for admission. There are 29 vocational high schools. Five use qualifying examinations for admission and an additional 22 use examinations for admission to certain curricula.

Boston's high schools are similarly classified as either general or vocational, and there are entrance examinations required for admission to some of both types. Rhode Island divides its high schools along the general and vocational lines.

Seven of the 14 high schools in Buffalo are referred to as academic or general. In addition, there are six vocational schools and one technical school.

Of the 22 public high schools in the city of Philadelphia, two offer only college preparatory programs. There are four technical high schools including one high school of agriculture and horticulture. The remaining 16 high schools are referred toas neighborhood or comprehensive schools.

Many of the metropolitan areas of the Great Lakes Region have special purpose high schools. Chicago has two technical high schools, nine vocational high schools and 44 general high schools. About 10 per cent of the Chicago high school enrollment attends the vocational schools and about 5 per cent attends the two technical schools.

All of the larger cities in Ohio have special purpose secondary schools. Several of the 25 high schools in Detroit are special purpose high schools. Both Minneapolis and St. Paul have special purpose vocational high schools.

In the cities of the North and the East there is a growing interest in special purpose high schools, both college preparatory and vocational. In the South and in the West there is still a strong attachment to the comprehensive ideal, but it is weakening rapidly. One of the reasons for the weakening is the rapid growth of Area Vocational and Technical Schools. These schools began in 1958. In 1962 the President's Panel of Consultants reported that provisions for vocational and technical education in rural areas and in small cities were extremely inadequate. The response, through the Vocational Act of 1963, was to further encourage the creation of Area Vocational Schools. The number of such schools has grown at the rate of about 150 per year. Presently there are about 1500 in the country. Although many of them attempt to achieve comprehensiveness, all of them are essentially specialized high schools.

The intent of the Area Vocational and Technical Schools is not to supplant the comprehensive character of other schools in the area; their immediate effect has been to reveal the lack of vocational comprehensiveness in the other schools of the areas served. Their likely ultimate effect will be to erode whatever comprehensiveness may now exist in the small cities and villages.

How have Area Vocational and Technical Schools served rural students? Not very well, according to Amberson[2], who reported in 1968 that only 9 per cent of their enrollment was from small schools and villages. The Area School concept has added momentum to the demise of the idealistic notion that all secondary schools in the United States can be comprehensive, but it has added little to the comprehensive nature of education accessible to rural students.

The Administrative Problems of Vocational Education in Rural Areas

The administrative problems associated with providing vocational education to rural students are extremely complex. The state responsibility for education has ordinarily been interpreted as a responsibility which could be delegated to local administrative units of varying sizes and varying occupational makeup. The local administrative unit has attempted to accept the responsibility to establish an educational program to implement the purposes of education and to be responsive to a local electorate whose locally levied taxes provided the bulk of the financing for the educational enterprise. The local electorate has always tended to be more responsive to interpretations of demand-supply relationships as they apply locally. They are quite willing to support college preparatory programs which allow younger generations to leave the community for additional education. They are less willing to support vocational education programs to prepare young people to accept jobs outside of the community with no apparent local benefit.

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[2]Amberson, Max L., "Variables and Situational Factors Associated with High School Vocational Education Programs," Doctor's Thesis, Ohio State University, Columbus, 1968, 185 pp.

Rural communities have been quite willing to give generous support to studies in agriculture, homemaking, and to the business and office occupations. Offerings in other occupations are not found with great frequency. Systems of state support providing for program reimbursement on a matching basis or budget approval and subvention have not been sufficient to expand the range of vocational offerings in rural areas.

A promising arrangement has been the development of intra-state regional combinations of schools organized, especially for extending the range of vocational offerings. In a sense, this is a type of school consolidation undertaken to provide those instructional services which none of the member schools could provide individually. Students attend their neighborhood school for general subjects, and they commute to a central school for vocational subjects.

There are many difficulties in this arrangement. First, it is necessary to develop a statewide system of such auxiliary units and to make such services available to all rural schools in the state. Second, it is difficult to organize for commuting convenience to all rural schools. Third, the arrangement tends to establish irreversibility in the pattern of the dual system, one comprehensive and the other schools relieved of such obligations. Its social cost would be a reinterpretation of the purposes of education, with its dual purposes continuing to fail in making vocational education sufficiently accessible to rural students.

Conclusion

The popular image of rural America is often discussed in the past tense. It is discussed as though it were a problem of the past, or a problem that may be solved by current population trends rather than by current rural reality.

Although declining, the American rural population is still enormous. It ranks as the world's eighth largest country, and the world's fifth largest underdeveloped country. The obvious characteristics of Rural America are its poverty and its low level of public services. Its problems are obscured by a fashionable focus on a so-called "urban crisis", while antecedent problems of greater severity go untended in Rural America.

Rural America has attempted to provide vocational and technical education through adherence to a system of comprehensive schools. Meanwhile, the metropolitan centers and the medium-sized cities of the country have begun to abandon the comprehensive ideal in favor of a school that focuses in a specialized way on vocational education to satisfy its need for comprehensiveness.

Various arrangements invoking regional services, intermediate units and timesharing arrangements have been devised to provide more adequately for the vocational education needs of rural areas. Most involve compromises which will satisfy some rural students, but none of these arrangements can make vocational and technical education accessible to all rural students.

The rural educational structure has demonstrated its capability for making minor adjustments, but it has not demonstrated its ability to perform a total educational task. In 1960 there were 19 million rural adults who had not completed high school, 3.1 million who had completed less than five years of elementary school and 700,000 who had never been enrolled for a single day. This is the uncompleted educational task. The retraining and upgrading of the 20 million person rural work force at the minimal rate of 5 per cent per year would bring an annual influx of one million persons into the rural educational system. This is the educational task of maintenance. The expansion of the ordinary vocational offerings into the rural educational structure would involve an additional two million students in vocational and technical education. This is the ordinary and recurring educational task.

The rural educational structure does not have the institutional, the instructional, nor the administrative or policy capacity to meet this educational requirement. Mobilization of effort at the state levels may help, but it will not be sufficient. Vocational and technical education in rural areas is likely to be a lost cause unless there is state and locally-supported federal action to achieve equality of educational opportunity.